

Psychological Safety in Teams: Essentials to Developing High Performance and Continual Learning Teams

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The Asian Conference on Psychology & the Behavioral Sciences 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study aims to study and improve workplace performance and team learning by improving team Psychological Safety through a proprietary designed program called the Certis ALIVE Program. Team Psychological Safety measures how much the team grow and learn from mistakes and allows risk-taking behaviour (Edmondson, A. 1999). Research was also done to understand the literature insights to how psychological safety is built and how the lack of trust will affect team performance and team learning. Based on key research done by Amy Edmondson on psychological safety and learning organizations. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected, analysed and discussed to measure and evaluate the effects of the ALIVE program in meeting its objectives of encouraging and building trust and psychological safety within and across teams.

Keywords: Psychological Safety, Trust, Learning, High Performance

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Introduction

Psychological safety affects trust within and across teams in an organization and the key aspects of psychological safety are trust, voice, engagement, team learning and team performance/efficacy. Organizations that invest in building trust within and across teams will see team performance and learning improve. The best approach to develop trust through encouraging voice, engagement and sharing of ideas at meetings, either formal, informal, within organic or cross-functional/task force teams and discussions. This is also where most time is spent by staff and employees of organizations.

As most work teams collaborate and discuss during organic team sessions, cross-functional team meetings, taskforce meetings and discussions, the platform to build trust and psychological safety should be to focus on these meetings and design them well so that Voice, Courage and Engagement of all participating members occurs, building a culture of open sharing and learning. It was also found that, Certis, as a global organization with over 34,000 people, over \$364,000 of man hours was invested in meetings annually, which made re-designing how meetings were conducted to encourage voice and courage as well as efficiency and productivity was absolutely critical.

Key design factors for such ALIVE meetings are:

- Set a time-boxed AGENDA with clear objectives.
- Frame issues so that we LEARN.
- Use INFORMATION and data to derive insights.
- Encourage equal share of VOICE.
- Make it safe for everyone to speak up.
- ENGAGE members to establish mutual purpose and engender mutual respect.

Key roles in meetings were also identified to allow for role-based learning and situational leadership opportunities rather than title/rank-based leadership to occur. These roles include the Chairperson, the Observer, the meeting Participant, the meeting Secretary. Responsibilities were also assigned to these roles to ensure that certain behaviours were encouraged and exhibited and reinforced.

Question Description	(P-Value) X-B
If I make a mistake on this team, it is often held against me.	0.10
Members of my team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.	0.14
People on my team sometimes reject others for being different.	0.83
It is safe to take a risk on my team.	0.06
It is difficult to ask other members of my team for help.	0.54
No one on my team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.	0.09
Working with members of my team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilised.	0.15

Table 1: Question Descriptions and P-Values on Psychological Safety

End of meeting observations and sharing were also conducted to immediately give feedback to the chairperson or members on how well the key aspects of Voice, Courage and Engagement were encouraged and reinforced. Post meeting surveys were also conducted to ensure data collection and analysis is done for future improvement, redesigns and review.

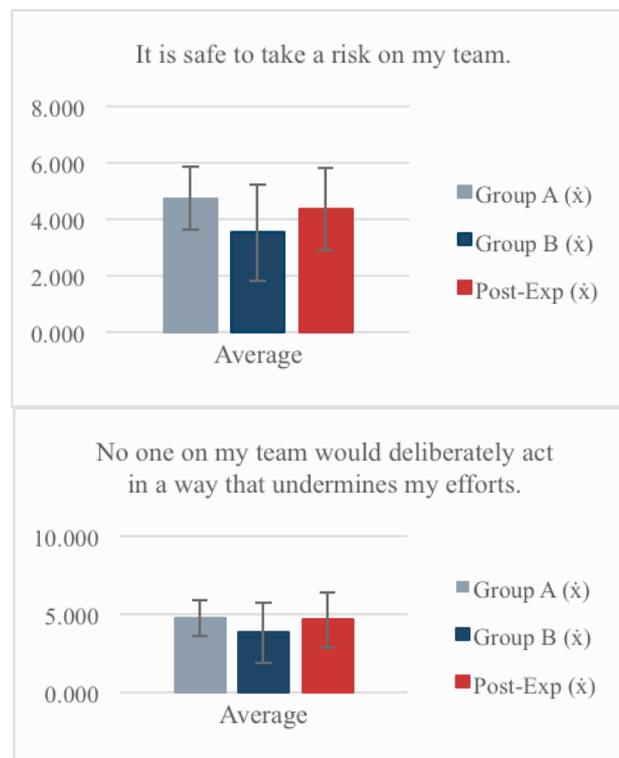
Research Study

This experiment aims to assess the effectiveness of the ALIVE programme. It aims to improve workplace performance and team learning by improving team Psychological Safety. Team Psychological Safety measures how much the team grow and learn from mistakes and allows risk-taking behaviour (Edmundson, 1999).

Team A is the control group and Team B is the experimental group, that will undergo the ALIVE programme and is surveyed before and after the ALIVE programme. The survey was conducted using a seven-point Likert-scale. Team A, Team B, and Team B after the ALIVE programme would be denoted as 'A', 'B', and 'X' in the subsequent discussions.

Results

Using a 10% level of significance, the ALIVE programme appeared to have a positive impact on the participants. Interestingly, participants shared that “It is safe to take risks (in their) team” and “No one (in their) team would deliberately act in a way that undermines (their) efforts” as seen in the tables below.



Charts 1 & 2: Key Results Comparison on Risk Taking and Undermining Teammates

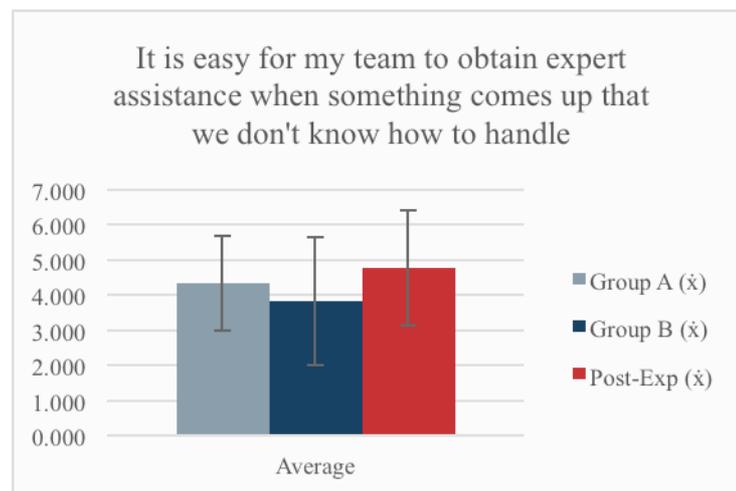
Data Analysis

This paper will highlight the variables which show significant improvements from the experimental group (Team B) after the ALIVE programme. This analysis will thus highlight questions which shows improvement in Team B's Performance. Four questions were subsequently identified, specifically; Supportive Organisational Context, Team Composition, Team Efficacy, and Team Learning Behaviours, and results tabulated and shown below.

Supportive Organisational Context	(P-Value) X-A	(P-Value) X-B
It is easy for my team to obtain expert assistance when something comes up that we don't know how to handle.	0.18	0.05*

Table 2: Supportive Organisational Context

Chart 3: Supportive Organisation Context Comparison



Team Composition	(P-Value) X-A	(P-Value) X-B
All members of my team have more than enough training and experience for the kind of work we have to do.	0.36	0.10

Table 3: Team Composition

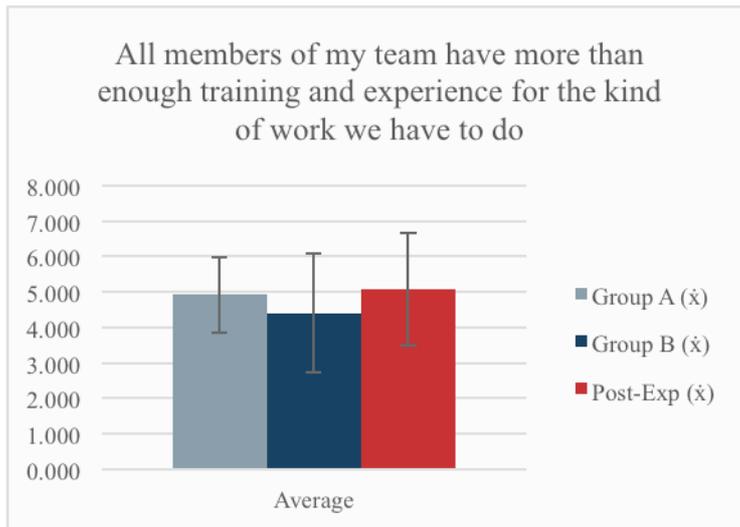


Chart 4: Team Composition Comparison

Team Efficacy	(P-Value) X-A	(P-Value) X-B
My team can achieve our task without requiring us to put in unreasonable time or effort.	0.05*	0.08 [†]

Table 4: Team Efficacy

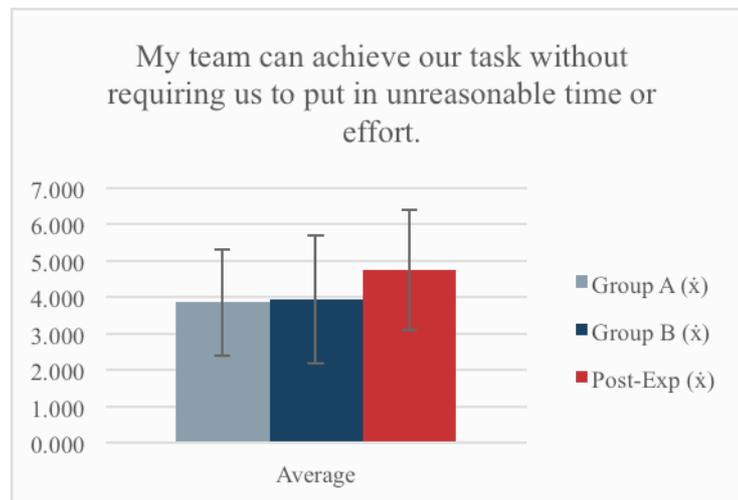


Chart 5: Team Efficacy Comparison

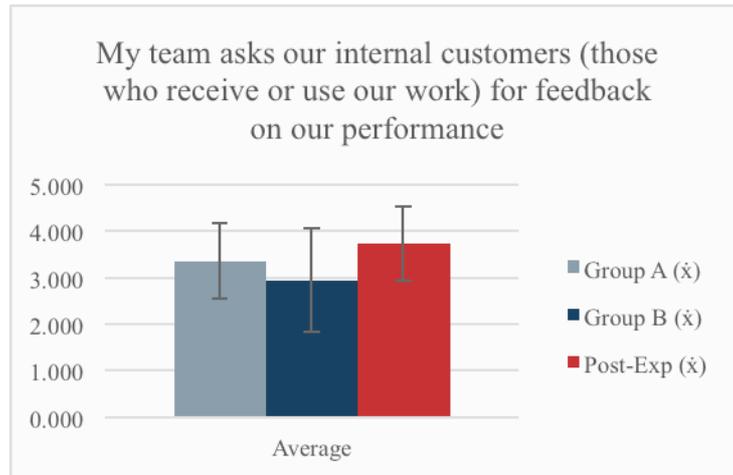


Chart 6: Team Learning Behaviours Comparison

Team Learning Behaviours	(P-Value) X-A	(P-Value) X-B
My team asks our internal customers (those who receive or use our work) for feedback on our performance.	0.08 [*]	0.01**

Table 5: Team Learning Behaviours

There were however observed that there are some inconsistencies, most likely as a result of Team B experiencing certain work issues or setbacks during the surveyed period. Hence affecting the overall results, where the survey showed evidence that the team was affected by mistakes and leader issues as seen below.

Question Description	(P-Value) A-B	(P-Value) X-A	(P-Value) X-B
If I make a mistake on this team, it is often held against me.	1.00	0.00	0.10
My team relies on outdated information or ideas.	0.99	0.00	0.09
My team does our work without stopping to consider all the information team members have.	0.94	0.00	0.05

Table 6: Data on Team Mistakes and Leader Issues

Overall, the experimental group demonstrated improvements post-ALIVE, specifically in areas of Risk-taking (“It is safe to take a risk on my team.”), Perceived trust (“No one on my team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.”), Team Efficacy (“My team can achieve our task without requiring us to put in unreasonable time or effort.”) and Team Learning Behaviours (“My team asks our internal customers (those who receive or use our work) for feedback on our performance.”) as seen in the table below. Post experimental group results were also better than the control group for Team Efficacy and Team Learning Behaviours.

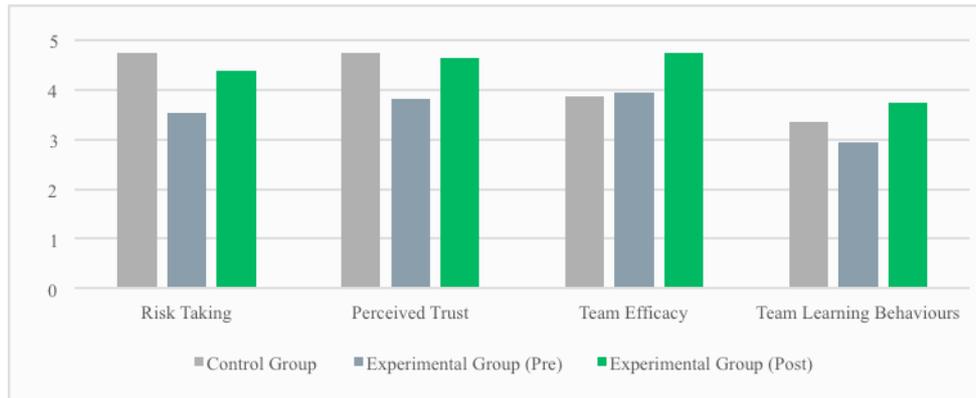


Chart 7: Key Control, Experimental Pre and Post Results

To further validate the causality between team psychological safety and the observed organisational outcomes, a qualitative study on the participants involved was also conducted. Individuals shared that they observed other members of the team having more courage to express their views and opinions.

Focus Group Discussion

To validate the causality between team psychological safety and the observed organisational outcomes, a qualitative study on the participants involved was designed and conducted. A focus group discussion was conducted to further understand the quantitative results. The focus group discussion also capitalised on interactions between participants to draw insights from their experiences. Below are the questions for the focus group discussion.

Validation that the ALIVE Programme has improved team psychological safety

- 1) After the ALIVE programme, do you feel more comfortable in taking risks at your workplace?
- 2) How has the ALIVE programme changed the way the team dealt with mistakes?
- 3) Do you have an experience of how the team dealt with mistakes using the ALIVE principles? Can you share the details about it?

Benefits of team psychological safety on the organisation

- 4) With the team having a higher bandwidth for mistakes, how has it impacted your team's performance?
 - a. Has your team developed a more supportive culture?
 - b. Do you feel that there's better synergy within the team?
 - c. Has your team become more efficient in the tasks you do?
 - d. How did members of your team cope and learn from mistakes after the ALIVE programme?

Focus Group Results Analysis

The focused group discussions statements and responses were analysed and key results and observations are shared here. Participants who underwent the focused group discussion agreed that they have developed team psychological safety after the ALIVE programme. However, they expressed that it is unclear if this can be

completely attributed to the programme as it depends on the individuals to revisit the lessons learned.

This was observed when participants shared that they adopted a more open mindset when they are dealing with mistakes of a team member. This was done through better communication as members are more willing to share opinions, prioritise agenda, and confront difficulties faced. Hence, expressing that they have greater bandwidth for mistakes.

The team articulated that they have observed members of their team applying lessons learned from the ALIVE programme. Individuals shared that they observe other members of the team having more courage to express their views and opinions. This has facilitated discussions on the short-comings of the members of the team, allowing them to grow together. Additionally, members have learned how to deliver feedback with tact.

There was also feedback about the programme that while it is not the objective of the ALIVE programme, members expressed that this progress depends largely on the initiative of the individual and could be more reliable. Some members expressed the need for a systemic or process-driven change to inculcate sustained change.

Nevertheless, results from both the survey and interview demonstrated that the team benefitted from the ALIVE programme. The enhanced team psychological safety was observable immediately after members of the team underwent the ALIVE programme.

Discussion and Conclusion

From this program study, quantitative and qualitative research and implementation, there is observable impact from the ALIVE programme on team psychological safety. Teams that are clear about their mission and objectives and have leaders that communicate these objectives often are fundamental components to psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). From this study, it also appears that team psychological safety has impact on positive organisational context, better perceived team composition, enhanced team efficacy, and improved team learning behaviours.

From the quantitative data alone, it was impossible to prove causality from a quantitative study. Hence, we conducted follow-up focused group discussion to understand the relationship between bandwidth for risk taking behaviour and better perceived organisational performance.

In conclusion, the ALIVE programme has achieved its intended objectives and the study shows positive results in Psychological Safety for teams after the implementation of this programme.

References

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